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Batman and the Sticky-fingered Maiden: Psychology as an Interpretive Practice

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Abstract

This paper is a short reflection on the nature of psychology as an interpretive practice by exploring the question: how, if at all, does interpretation apply to the field of psychology? This author presents the notion that interpretation is relational and that both client and therapist *histories* shape the individual's ways of interpreting experience and prejudices that arise in therapeutic practice.

Keywords

interpretation, psychology, hermeneutics

If *interpretation*, as a concept, were a living breathing being, I think it would be female. I think she would be exceptionally quiet, often speaking in a whisper and wearing fuzzy white slippers so as to tread lightly and not give away her presence. I like to think she would have sticky fingers from venturing into many unknown and mysterious places and would be found exploring secluded nooks and camouflaged caves - places of darkness that yearn to be exposed and lit from within. Her very presence would be experienced by some as desirable, and by others as unwelcome given her tendency to ignite a chemical reaction. She would have a womb filled with preconceived notions, understandings, misunderstandings, personal histories, and internalized beliefs all bumping up against one another like a metal vessel filled with atoms. In the field of psychology, interpretation is an omnipresent force that psychologists and clients alike must appreciate and revere, as this sticky-fingered maiden is a lingering and necessary ingredient for human connection.

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Interpretation: The Significance of Relationships

Interpretation, as I see it from a hermeneutic perspective, is closely bound up with how we understand and make sense of experience. We can only truly and deeply understand experience if we enter into the interpretation of it, and yet we can only interpret an experience if we have some understanding of it. This understanding need not always be in the form of personal experience, as understanding may come from hearing the experience of another. Nevertheless, the relationship between interpretation and understanding is both iterative and symbiotic. To add to the complexity of this matter, interpretation also seems to be deeply embedded in relationships. As a counselling psychology student, I believe we (psychologists, also referred to throughout as therapists or practitioners) are constantly in a state of interpretive practice as we seek to understand not only our own experiences, but also the experiences of another, our clients. In this way, the focus is on *interpretation* as inextricably linked to and enrooted in interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. We are *in* something, and that which we are *in* is relation to the self or another.

In a similar vein, we humans, along with our experiences, do not exist in a vacuum. We are constantly being shaped by other inhabitants and the greater world around us, while at the same time shaping others. The practice of psychology, more specifically, can be thought of as a microcosm whereby this interaction between two beings has the power to shape and change both parties. For this change to take form, the psychological practice depends on the porosity of humans, that we can be touched, moved, and transformed by our own experiences and by bearing witness to the experiences of others. In so doing, we may enter into the experience of another yet we continue to remain grounded in our own bodies and within our own mind. In other words, psychologists can *listen* with openness yet we can never escape the fact that we *hear* and process all things interpretatively.

Interpretation in Psychology

Turning briefly to the literature on psychotherapy, the term “interpretation” is also described as a technique used by the therapist in an effort to extend and deepen understanding. Patterson (1974) had this to say about interpretation:

Clarification responses deal with what is explicitly and implicitly in the client’s behaviour, verbal and/or nonverbal. Interpretations go beyond this, involving a contribution by the therapist. In interpretation, the therapist adds to what the client is saying, going beyond the client’s verbalizations and putting in something of his own. (p. 110)

Porter (1959) also attempted to elucidate this concept of interpretation in psychology. As he explained, therapists move beyond reflecting and towards interpretation when their motivation changes. As Porter stated,

The difference is not in what the therapist says. The difference is in the therapist’s purpose when he says it....When the therapist utters some words which are a construing of what the client or patient has expressed and it is the therapist’s purpose to be asking of the client or patient whether or not the construction put on the client’s expression was the

meaning intended- that's a reflection. When the therapist utters some words which are a construing of what the client or patient has expressed and it is the therapist's purpose to be informing the patient what meaning his expression holds regardless of his, the patient's, intended meaning- that's an interpretation. (p. 57)

This distinction between reflexive and interpretive practice seems to highlight the notion that practitioners are deeply intertwined and invested in the therapeutic process - their voices, experiences, and perspectives are of value in shaping the therapeutic alliance and the therapeutic journey. The therapist is not simply a parrot tasked with repeating key statements or offering re-phrased summaries constructed by the client. Nor is the therapist a detached and all-knowing being shrouded behind a screen as in the days of Freud. Instead, both client and therapist bring forth their experiences, past and present, along with their interpretations of these experiences. In so doing, the interaction is a prosperous one as both parties offer something to the other, and both potentially reap the rewards of such an encounter.

Histories: Owning our Suitcase

What might the interpretive practice look like in the therapy room? Could interpretive practice be as basic as offering the client a metaphor for their experience? I would argue yes, it can be that simple, but like most things in life it can also be far more complex. By offering our interpretation of what the client brings forth, there is the possibility to change, make anew, or shift ever so slightly the client's way of seeing his or her own experience. Yet the interpretive practice of psychology also allows for a rich bi-directional change, wherein the therapist too is transformed as a result of the interaction.

This process is layered and somewhat convoluted. As the client interprets his or her experiences through a particular frame of reference (taking into account, either consciously or unconsciously, the historical, social, emotional, cognitive, and cultural contexts), therapists too enter into relationships with a particular frame of reference from which to understand and interpret their own and the clients' experiences. We create and carry with us our *histories*, and return to these stories of the past often, perhaps without knowing.

Put another way, both therapist and client enter to the therapeutic interaction with a metaphorical suitcase full of past "stuff." For some this stuff may include positive experiences, such as a healthy and happy childhood filled with memories of feeling loved and cared for. Yet the suitcase may also be filled with negative stuff, such as past hurts and experiences of abuse. For most of us, the suitcase is filled with both types of experiences - the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. With this in mind, psychology, as an interpretive practice, is about recognizing the significance of our suitcase and how the contents of this suitcase shape and influence our interpretations.

Prejudices: Batman for You, Batman for Me

When thinking about how best to illustrate psychology as an interpretive practice, I am reminded of my work with one client, "Miles," a 36 year-old male. Miles had a dream of becoming a stand-up comedian and worked hard at this pursuit, often devoting hours to perfecting his craft.

However, he made little in the way of income and was forced to live at home with his parents as a result. Early on in our work together, when asked about what he would like to get out of therapy, Miles stated, “I want to become my own Batman.” Batman. Bat man. A man who is a bat? A bat who is a man? There is so much in the word and there is so much in the meaning of the word that could be unpacked.

Dialoguing with a client allows me, the therapist, to do just that. I can not only check for clarification (e.g., asking “Batman - like the cartoon?”), but I can also deepen and enrich my understanding by asking questions that bring the topic to life such as “What does Batman represent to you?”; “What does it mean to become your own Batman?”; and “How will you know if and when you have become your own Batman?” Entangled in all of this, of course, are my own beliefs about and past experience with Batman.

For me, having been raised by a strong feminist mother, I was always told that I am no different from my male peers. As a result, at the age of seven when springtime approached and my mother needed to purchase new rubber boots for me she bought the boots that were on sale - black, matte rubber boots with a Batman symbol affixed to the front for all to see. I was mortified. I wanted sickly-sweet bubble gum pink boots with sparkles yet I was stuck with these black Batman demon boots. Batman, for me, will be forever tied to this experience of wanting to embrace the feminine yet being forced to look like a boy. According to my female peers at the time, Batman was stupid and as a result of wearing these Batman boots I, too, was stupid. I felt set apart from other girls, flawed, and disgusting. Batman represented shame. So, when Miles brought up this desire to become his own Batman I interpreted it, perhaps without consciously knowing, from a place of past hurt. However, this is not what Batman represented for Miles, quite the opposite in fact, as I would come to learn in the later sessions. For Miles, Batman was a symbol of independence; he was a hero, a respected, valued, and contributing member of society. Batman was also confident and acted selflessly for the good of others. These were all attributes that Miles venerated and sought to embody.

Because of this experience with Miles, I was forced to open up my suitcase, take a critical look, and dig around a little. As a result of our ongoing dialogue about becoming his own Batman, Miles would open up and unpack his own suitcase, in turn exploring the notion of what it means to be masculine and challenging what he believed to be the dominant discourse of hegemonic masculinity. As it relates to the interpretive practice of psychology, we both came to this therapeutic experience with our own “stuff” and yet we left through the same door, slightly changed, but headed in different directions.

To suggest psychology is an interpretive practice is to explicitly bring to light the relevance of the ineradicable, ever-present sticky-fingered maiden. She is such a constant that we may very well forget her presence, similar to the way in which we tune out the nearby conversations in a café or habituate to the smell of coffee as it wafts through the room. While it may be true that she sometimes sit in the corner of the therapy room seemingly inconspicuous, at other times she will be positioned in front of, or in between, the client and therapist ensuring her presence is not overlooked. No matter our acknowledgment, she will persist always and in all ways.

References

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